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SUBJECT: ARMENIAN MEDIA, PUBLIC CRITICAL OF CEREMONY MARKING THE  
OPENING OF HOLY CROSS CHURCH

YEREVAN 00000386 001.2 OF 002

(U) Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (SBU) Armenian media outlets varied from semi-critical to extremely critical in their coverage of the March 29 Holy Cross (Aktamar Island) Church re-opening ceremony. Most claimed that the opening was a propaganda move and berated Turkey for placing Turkish flags and a portrait of Ataturk on the walls of the church/museum. The Armenian MFA, while calling the renovation positive, stated that the move would not improve bilateral relations. END SUMMARY.

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SOME MEDIA OUTLETS HARSHLY CRITICIZE TURKEY...  
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¶2. (SBU) Yerkir Media TV, the official station of the nationalistic ARF Dashnaktsutyun Party, broadcast the ceremony live. The broadcast opened by showing Turkish flags and Turkish Republic founder Kemal Ataturk's portrait on the walls of Holy Cross, and from that point on, commentary about the ceremony was very negative. The station featured historians and ARF members commenting on the ceremony, as well as viewers calling in to express their opinions. Virtually all of the commentators and callers expressed resentment--many quite fervently-- towards Turkey for what they said was an attempt to use an ancient Armenian site to sway public opinion in favor of Turkey. Commentators called the event a "mockery of the Armenian people," and specifically of the Armenian delegation, since the Turkish speakers referred to the GOAM delegation simply as "guests from abroad," and seemed to studiously avoid saying the words "Armenia" or "Armenian" in any context during the ceremony. Callers also expressed frustration with Patriarch Mesrop Mutafyan's praise for the event as a reconciliation effort, and berated him for not being critical enough of Turkey. ARF Bureau member, Giro Manoyan, however, in his on-air commentary, excused the Armenian prelate, saying Armenians must understand Mutafyan is effectively a hostage of the Turkish government.

¶3. (SBU) Armenia TV, another pro-government channel, also broadcast coverage of the opening that was quite negative. At one point during the ceremony, a musician commented that he loved Holy Cross Church as much as Hagia Sofia. Armenia TV's anchorperson commented darkly, "They love our church, they love our lands...they love our blood." Illustrating the point, the station flashed shots first of Holy Cross Church, then scenes from Anatolia, and then the dead body of the late Hrant Dink (the ethnic Armenian journalist murdered in Istanbul January 19).

¶4. (SBU) Newspapers were less provocative, with most reporting the facts without editorial comment. However, Hayastani Hanrapetutyun, Armenia's government-run newspaper, published an article entitled, "A Gesture for Armenia or for the West?" The article claimed that the opening was purely a PR move aimed at improving Turkey's relations with the EU and the United States, and states that if Turkey actually wanted to improve its relations with Armenia, it would go through diplomatic and official channels. The author, however, expressed anxiety that this is not clear to foreign countries, saying that the presence of so many foreign journalists at the opening "is cause for concern."

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...WHILE THE GOVERNMENT STATION IS LESS CRITICAL  
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¶5. (SBU) Armenian Public TV's coverage was less emotional and somewhat less critical of Turkey. For the most part, the state-funded station simply showed footage of the ceremony. While commentary was more subdued, the station did note the presence of Turkish flags on and around Holy Cross, and reported that the Armenian delegation was not acknowledged during the ceremony.

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MFA PRAISES RENOVATION BUT CRITICIZES MOTIVATION  
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¶6. (SBU) Virtually all media outlets reported on the Armenian MFA's statement which, while calling the restoration a "positive move," said that the opening would not help improve Armenian-Turkish relations. The statement said that the opening "was not transformed into a new opportunity in Armenia-Turkish relations, because the Turkish government has not found it expedient to do so." It notes that the border was not opened for the Armenian delegation to travel to Turkey, and claims that it is "no coincidence that this opening is being held just as the U.S. Congress is considering a resolution

YEREVAN 00000386 002.2 OF 002

on affirming the U.S. record on the Armenian Genocide."

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COMMENT  
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¶7. (SBU) On first reaction, the event appears to have antagonized Armenians' perceptions of Turkey more than it helped. While we take it for granted that Turkish national symbols--such as the national flag and the founder's portrait--will feature prominently in any public ceremony in Turkey, to most Armenian viewers this was seen as an unpardonably provocative act of disrespect on the part of Turkish authorities. We are somewhat discouraged by how easily Armenian popular opinion was affronted in this case. In such a climate, it will be difficult to navigate a course between the Scylla and Charybdis of Armenian and Turkish national pride. This is especially true so long as the border is sealed and regional projects (railroad, oil, and gas) routinely bypass Armenia.

GODFREY